

No retreat on bridge funds, say lawmakers

Architects of the deal to build the span near Folsom Dam decry new approach.

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration raised the ire of the Sacramento-area congressional delegation this week when it said it is rethinking how to finance a much-needed bridge over the American River at the base of Folsom Dam, an issue the lawmakers thought they settled last year.

When Congress passed the historic agreement reached between Reps. Robert Matsui, D-Sacramento, and John Doolittle, R-Roseville, last year setting the direction of American River flood control, it determined that the \$66 million bridge would be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as part of that package.

But John Paul Woodley Jr., the Army's assistant secretary who presides over the corps, said at a House appropriations subcommittee hearing Wednesday that the White House Office of Management and Budget is "re-evaluating" that idea and now considers the bridge a highway project that should be funded out of federal gasoline-tax revenues.

"We're not going to sit back and let this happen," said Doolittle, attributing the renewed conflict to "one rogue bureaucrat at the Office of Management and Budget."

"It is annoying that someone at OMB is trying to slow this down," Matsui said.

Rep. Doug Ose, R-Sacramento, whose district includes the Folsom area, also expressed anger.

"Whoever is trying to pick this fight would be better off doing something else," Ose said.

Woodley's statement came at a hearing of the Energy and Water Appropriations subcommittee, which will approve how much money will be steered toward the bridge project and the other components of the Matsui-Doolittle deal, including water projects in Doolittle's district and work toward raising the height of Folsom Dam to give Sacramento better flood protection.

This year, the Corps of Engineers is spending about \$600,000 on studies and planning for the new bridge. It has been conducting public meetings this week in El Dorado Hills, Granite Bay and Folsom on the project.

"Our direction comes from Congress in a bill signed by the president," said the corps' Sacramento spokesman, Jason Fanselau. "It directed us to expedite construction of the Folsom Dam bridge."

But the Bush administration's budget is seeking only \$415,000 in 2005 funding for the Matsui-Doolittle legislation, which if approved would mean a sharp drop in funding for the bridge work.

The bridge became a top priority last year when the Bureau of Reclamation, citing security concerns, closed the road over the dam to public use and created a traffic nightmare in Folsom by redirecting about 18,000 daily commuters.

While the Matsui-Doolittle legislation called for expedited work on the new bridge, the Bush administration's budget proposal essentially relegates it to the back burner.

The corps' Sacramento district had been prepared to spend as much as \$11 million next year on work related to the Matsui-Doolittle deal, including \$1.1 million on bridge engineering and design work and millions more to begin construction work pursuant to the congressional directive.

Woodley's suggestion that the project's financing was now being rethought at the White House drew sharp rebukes from subcommittee leaders, who told him that "a deal is a deal" and that they expected the legislation to be expeditiously implemented as Congress intended.

Various sources said the administration believes last year's announcement by the Bureau of Reclamation that it was closing public access to the road across the top of Folsom Dam because of national security concerns weakened the justification for the Corps of Engineers' involvement in the bridge's construction.

Because the road would have to be closed while an additional seven feet was added to the top of the dam, the project had called for the corps to build a temporary bridge. But when the road was closed for a different reason - national security - the new bridge became a routine transportation project, in the administration's reported view, that should go through the normal funding process out of the National Highway Trust Fund.

Congress is struggling over a highway funding measure this year, and it is not clear that a bill will make it to the president's desk in a congressional session that will be shortened by the national elections this fall.

Doolittle bristled at any thought of making the bridge compete with other transportation priorities. Its \$66 million cost would mean other highway projects to relieve congestion around the Sacramento area might have to be deferred.

"Just when you think you've got something settled, this comes up - and by my own administration," Doolittle said. "This is some arrogant bureaucrat wanting to impose his own personal agenda."

Both Matsui and Doolittle said they expect congressional appropriators will rally to their support and insist that appropriate federal funding is approved to keep the bridge and other components of the Matsui-Doolittle deal moving forward next year.

"You will have strong bipartisan support of the local congressional delegation and the Energy and Water Appropriations subcommittee," said Doolittle, who sits on the panel.

"This project already is authorized," said Matsui. "We all knew what the funding would be and that it would come out of the corps' budget. The president signed the bill into law.

"The mandate is to move forward with funding," he said. "There shouldn't be any hesitation in that. I don't think this will be a problem."